

Participatory Guarantee Systems

– Shared Vision, Shared Ideals

Introduction

There are dozens of Participatory Guarantee Systems serving farmers and consumers around the world. Although details of methodology and process vary, the consistency of core principles across countries and continents is remarkable. The elements and characteristics outlined here demonstrate our shared vision but are not meant to concretely direct existing or future PGS programs towards conformity or “normalization.” The very life-blood of these programs lies in the fact that they are created by the very farmers and consumers that they serve. As such, they are adopted and specific to the individual communities, geographies, politics and markets of their origin. This document of Key Elements and Key Characteristics is then respectfully presented only to highlight those elements that do remain consistent across PGS systems –the Shared Vision and Shared Ideals that have brought them together.

The Mission of the Working Group

The PGS Working Group will develop, facilitate and encourage Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) around the world. While we work to identify and synthesize key elements and characteristics of a PGS, we will maintain a fundamentally open and inclusive attitude to the many and various ways a PGS can function.

PGS Philosophy grows from Organic Philosophy

Participatory Guarantee Systems subscribe to the same ideals that guided yesterday’s pioneering organic farmers. PGS programs require a fundamentally ecological approach to agriculture that uses no synthetic chemical pesticides, fertilizers or GMO’s, and further sustains farmers and workers in a cradle of long-term economic sustainability and social justice. The primarily local and direct market focus of PGS programs encourages community building, environmental protection and support to local economies in general.

PGS Philosophy (Fundamental Values)

Participatory Guarantee Systems share a common goal with change to third-party certification systems in providing a credible guarantee for consumers seeking organic produce. The difference is in approach. As the name suggests, direct participation of farmers and even consumers in the certification process is not only encouraged but may be required. Such involvement is entirely realistic in the context of the small farms and local, direct markets that PGS systems are most likely to serve. Active participation on the part of the stakeholders results in greater empowerment but also greater responsibility. This requires PGS programs to place a high priority on knowledge and capacity building –not only for producers but for consumers as well. This direct involvement allows PGS programs to be less onerous in terms of paperwork and record-keeping requirements –an important element,

since PGS systems seek to be absolutely inclusive in bringing small farmers into an organic system of production. In stark contrast to existing certification programs that start with the idea that farmers must prove they are in compliance to be certified, PGS programs use an integrity based approach that starts with a foundation of trust. It builds from there with an unparalleled transparency and openness, maintained in an environment that minimizes hierarchies and administrative levels.

B) Key Elements

1. Shared Vision

A fundamental strength of the Participatory Guarantee System lies in the conscious shared vision that farmers and consumers have in the core principles guiding the program. While PGS programs may vary in the level of actual participation, they thrive because of the active awareness of why, how, and not least of all WHO is being served.

2. Participatory

Participatory certification is based on a methodology presupposing intense involvement by those interested in the production and consumption of these products. Principles and rules for organic production are conceived and applied with the contribution of all stakeholders – producers, consultants and consumers. The credibility of the production quality is a consequence of participation.

3. Transparency

All stakeholders, including farmers, must be aware of exactly how the guarantee mechanism generally works, the process and how decisions are made. This does not mean that every detail is known by everyone but rather a basic understanding of how the system functions. People should be aware about the criteria of how decision on certification is made, especially the reason why some farm cannot be certified. This implies that there must be some written documents available about the PGS and the documents are made available to all interested parties.

Privacy and commercially sensitive information of producers gathered during the operation of PGS must be treated with confidentiality. But such confidentiality should not be used to compromise the transparency principle. This may seem in conflict with transparency but a line must be drawn between privacy and commercially sensitive information, on the one hand, and access to information for the purpose of transparency.

4. Trust - “integrity based approach”

The advocates of PGS hold to the idea that farmers can be trusted and the organic certification system should be an expression of this trust. It should reflect a community’s capacity to demonstrate this trust through the application of their different social and cultural control mechanisms, providing the necessary oversight to ensure the organic integrity of their organic farmers. Thus, a variety of culturally specific (local) quantitative and qualitative mechanisms for demonstrating and measuring organic integrity are recognized and celebrated. These are integral to the certification process.

5. Learning Process

The intent of most PGS has been to provide more than a certificate, also aiming to provide the tools and mechanisms for supporting sustainable community and organic development where the livelihoods and status of farmers can be enhanced.

It is important that the process of certification contributes to the construction of knowledge nets that are built by all the actors involved in the production and consumption of the organic product. The effective involvement of farmers, consultants and consumers on the elaboration and verification of the principles and rules not only leads to the generation of credibility of the organic product, but also to a permanent process of learning which develops capacities in the communities involved.

6. Horizontality.

Horizontality means sharing of power. The verification of the organic quality of a product or process is not concentrated in the hands of few. All involved on the process of participatory certification have the same level of responsibility and capacity to establish the organic quality of a product or process.

C) Key Features of a PGS

1. **Norms conceived by the stakeholders** through a democratic and participatory process, but always in accordance with the commonly understood sense of what constitutes an organic product. The norms should stimulate creativity, which is a characteristic of organic farmers, instead of inhibit it.
2. **Grassroots Organization:** The Participatory Certification should be perceived as a result of a social dynamic, based on an active organization of all stakeholders.
3. **Is appropriate to smallholder agriculture**, because the participatory nature and horizontal structure of the programs allows for more appropriate and less costly mechanisms of certification, and actually highlights and celebrates and encourages consumers to seek out smallholders.
4. **Principles and values** that enhance the livelihoods and well being of farming families and promote organic agriculture.
5. **Documented management systems and procedures** – There may be minimal paperwork required of farmers but there will be ways in which they are expected to demonstrate their organic commitment and integrity, these ways should be documented by the PGS.
6. **Mechanisms to verify farmer's compliance** to the established norms, which is able to stimulate participation, organization, and which allow a learning process for all the stakeholders.
7. **Mechanisms for supporting farmers** to produce organic products and be certified as organic farmers, to include field advisors, newsletters, farm visits, web sites etc.
8. Should have a bottom-line document, for example a **farmer's pledge** stating his/her agreement with the established norms.
9. **Seals or labels** providing evidence of organic status.
10. **Clear and previously defined consequences** for farmers not complying with standards, actions recorded in a data base or made public in some way.